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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000203

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN SECURITY FORCE DEADLY CRACKDOWN ON KURDISH
NEW YEAR'S FESTIVITIES

REF: A. REF A: 2007 DAMASCUS 318

[B](#). REF B: 2007 DAMASCUS 308

[C](#). REF C: 2007 DAMASCUS 1094

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 B/D

[1](#). (C) Summary: Syrian security forces resorted to deadly force over the weekend while dispersing unarmed Kurds celebrating the Kurdish New Year in the northeastern Syrian town of Qamishli. This incident marks the second crackdown on Kurds in a little over five months, and Kurdish political factions have vowed not to remain passive should another deadly event come to pass. These heavy-handed tactics to largely apolitical Kurdish New Year's celebrations contrast with last year's relatively passive security response to Nowruz events that had a distinctive political flavor. The SARG is likely sending a signal to the Kurds that will not tolerate any challenge to the Syrian regime during a period rife with regional tensions, particularly on the eve of the Arab League Summit. End Summary

[2](#). (C) On March 24, Hervin Osse (protect), Damascus representative of the Kurdish Future Movement, confirmed open source reporting that a Syrian security force crack-down in the northeast town of Qamishli had left three dead and as many as nine injured. The incident took place on March 20 during the celebration of the Kurdish New Year (Nowruz), as hundreds of Kurdish youths celebrated in the streets of Qamishli.

[3](#). (C) According to Hervin, who was in Qamishli at the time and shared with us her cell phone video footage of the events, around 7:30 PM Syrian security forces "inexplicably" began using tear gas and water cannons on a crowd of roughly 500 unarmed Kurdish youths who were peacefully participating in New Year festivities. Hervin said the Syrian security forces then began to fire indiscriminately into the crowd, causing death and injury. One of Hervin's videos showed a boisterous unarmed crowd of young men and women in the streets, all dancing, singing and waiving flags to traditional Kurdish music. Local stores appeared decorated for the occasion and the streets were lined with candles and small contained fires. In another video, fire trucks can be seen spraying water into the crowd and then a series of automatic and semi automatic gun fire breaks through the audio. Hervin insisted that the revelers made no provocative moves, adding that the lack of injured Syrian security officers bolsters this assertion.

[4](#). (C) Immediately following the incident, representatives of the various Kurdish political factions met to strategize.

Joint funerals and demonstrations were organized for March 21 and the various political factions released a joint statement condemning the incident, according to Hervin. A copy of the statement was passed to Pol Off, the signatories included: the Kurdish Democratic Front in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Coalition in Syria, the Kurdish Coordination Committee and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party. A peaceful and solemn funeral/demonstration took place the next day as scheduled and drew as many as 100,000 mourners, estimated Hervin.

15. (C) Hervin explained that her movement, along with the other Kurdish political factions, would not in the future call for peace and calm, as they had done in the wake of this incident, if the Syrian authorities continue to "murder Kurds." She added that various political movements would call for nation-wide protests, "the likes of which have not been seen since 2004, should this happens again." Hervin said she understood that it is difficult for the United States to provide material support to Syrian Kurds but could not understand why there had not been more press or public statements on the matter.

16. (C) State controlled Syrian press was typically silent on the killings in Qamishli. According to anonymous Syrian officials quoted in international press reports, the police crackdown came in response to the blockage of traffic in Qamishli and the failure of Nowruz enthusiasts to heed police instructions to disperse. A critical statement by Iraqi KRG President Massoud Barzani condemning the incident and calling for full investigation raised concern among Syrian officials, according to Syrian press contacts, who suggested that Barzani's statements are only adding to the tensions in the north. One contact offered that Barzani's comments would

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likely embolden Kurdish activists in Syria's northeastern territories while causing the Syrian regime to strike a careful balance between its desire to maintain stability while not undermining efforts to improve relations with Iraq's key leadership.

17. (C) Unlike this year, last year's celebrations included a political rally in Damascus and gatherings in Kurdish areas between Aleppo and Qamishli (ref A.) Indeed, political dissident Riad Seif was briefly detained during one 2007 Nawruz Damascus festival, as security forces wanted to insure that he was not afforded an opportunity to address the politically charged crowds (reftel B). Embosfs at the time noticed both a small overt Syrian security presence and a larger covert security presence. Nevertheless, the security seemed to be monitoring the event, rather than trying to interfere. By comparison, according to local contacts, this year's decidedly toned-down (in both scope and rhetoric) celebratory events drew an overtly heavy-handed response by the SARG and represented a marked departure from last year's passive monitoring by security forces.

18. (C) Comment: Nowruz festivities have often led to clashes between security forces and Kurds in north-east Syria but this incident marks the second SARG crackdown on Kurdish activities in Qamishli in the last five months. Lingering tensions over the November 2 (reftel C) clash between police and Syrian Kurds protesting against Turkish military incursions into northern Iraq may provide one explanation for the Syrian crackdown. Unlike last year's Nowruz celebrations, the SARG's swift resort to overwhelming force may also have reflected a desire to prevent any challenge to the Syrian regime's authority on the eve of the Arab League Summit in Damascus. Whatever triggered this crackdown, the rise of Kurdish resentment is unifying diverse Kurdish political parties.

CORBIN